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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 003101

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP

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SUBJECT: AMIR APPOINTS SHEIKH SABAH AS PRIME MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: On July 13, the Amir issued a decree formally naming Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah Prime Minister of Kuwait. This ended a behind-the-scenes row between the two leading branches of the Kuwaiti ruling al-Sabah family over the job, a position traditionally reserved for the Crown Prince. The disagreement over the Prime Minister post had dragged on for several days, causing some local observers to worry that it might delay the July 19 inaugural session of the newly elected National Assembly. The appointment of Sheikh Sabah, which had been widely expected before the delay, paves the way for the formation of a new cabinet. However, it may also have opened the door to future squabbling between the Salim and Jabir lines of the al-Sabah family over the future of the Crown Prince. The current Crown Prince, Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah, is mentally and physically incapable of fulfilling his duties, and many believe he should step down. End Summary.

2. (C) After days of rampant speculation, the Amir appointed Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah Prime Minister on July 13, the first time the position has ever been entrusted to someone other than the Crown Prince. The decision by the Amir came after a tumultuous episode in which the leading Jabir and Salim branches of the ruling Sabah family engaged in a struggle behind the scenes for control of the office of Prime Minister, and possibly, future control of the office of Crown Prince.

"GO BACK TO YOUR CAMELS"

3. (C) On July 12, a noted Kuwaiti cultural contact who is a close friend with a grandson of First Deputy Prime Minister (and acting head of government) Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed told acting DCM of a dramatic showdown in Kuwait's ruling family over the issue of whether the Amir would issue an expected decree transferring the office of prime minister from the ailing Crown Prince to Sheikh Sabah. According to this contact, Sheikh Sabah's grandson told him that the al-Salim branch of the family was strongly resisting the proposed transfer of the premiership to Sheikh Sabah, who like the Amir comes from the al-Jaber branch of the ruling al Sabah family. Directed by the Amir to work out the issue with the al-Salim's, Sheikh Sabah met on July 10 with Sheikh Salem al-Ali, the head of the Kuwaiti National Guard and the senior member of the al-Salim branch, to discuss moving the premiership from the Crown Prince to Sheikh Sabah.

4. (C) The meeting, according to our contact, did not go well. Sheikh Salim is alleged to have told Sheikh Sabah that the latter should talk to the Crown Prince about whether he would agree to surrender the premiership, to which Sheikh Sabah replied that he had already received three different answers from the Crown Prince on the subject: that the CP would agree with transferring the premiership to Sheikh Sabah; that the CP would agree provided that his own son, Sheikh Fahd, became deputy prime minister; and that the CP would not agree to transfer the position at all. (NOTE: Our contact said that the grandson described the Crown Prince as weaving in and out of lucidity in his conversations, often engaging an interlocutor with apparently full comprehension before lapsing into a confused state and asking "Who are you?" and "Whose house is this?" END NOTE) Sheikh Sabah then asked Sheikh Salim if he would support his bid to become PM, and the latter refused. Sheikh Sabah is then said to have asked Sheikh Salem if he understood the constitution of Kuwait, and when Sheikh Salim said that he did not, Sheikh Sabah told him "then go back to your camels" before storming out of the meeting.

5. (C) Our contact said that the al-Salim family members then offered a compromise to Sheikh Sabah, wherein he would become prime minister but the al-Salim would appoint his cabinet. Sheikh Sabah is alleged to have refused this offer and to have announced that if he was not made prime minister within the week, he would resign his position and leave the country.

6. (C) According to our contact, negotiations then ensued within the family to find a solution that would accord Sheikh Sabah the premiership with full prerogatives while reassuring the al-Salim that they are not being cut out of power.

Evidently, these negotiations have now succeeded, but the exact nature of any deals struck remains to be seen.

17. (C) Comment: Kuwaiti Arabic dailies had been predicting for days that an Amiri decree separating the office of prime minister from that of Crown Prince and transferring it to Sheikh Sabah was imminent. However, that the al-Salim's should inveigh against the proposed separation of the premiership from their ailing kinsman should not be a surprise to anyone familiar with Kuwait's idiosyncratic tradition of dynastic succession, in which two branches of the same family have alternated as Amir and Crown Prince since the death of Mubarak the Great in 1915. To the al-Salim--already overmatched by the more numerous and better positioned al-Jaber progeny--any abridgement of the Crown Prince's long-standing prerogatives could be interpreted as a step on the way to the ultimate removal of the Crown Prince himself. If protocol can be used as a guide, it appears that al-Salim fears may in fact be realized; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has instructed post that Shaykh Sabah should now be addressed as His Highness. Further evidence will be provided by the cabinet appointments which should be announced within the next 48 to 72 hours. The fate of such Sheikh Saad stalwarts as Minister of Interior Mohammed Khaled al-Sabah in the new government will be instructive.

JONES